



THE ALABAMA VETERAN

SPRING 2022 ISSUE



ADVA

NEWSLETTER

**NEWSLETTER
HIGHLIGHTS**

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ADVA

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

*"Proudly Serving
America's Finest"*

COMMISSIONER'S CORNER



COMMISSIONER KENT DAVIS

The idea behind Commissioner's Corner is to give extra insight into focus areas or projects we're working on at the ADVA. In previous newsletters, I've written about Veteran suicide prevention, given a detailed update on the state Veterans homes, and discussed the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. Additionally, I'd like to use this space to discuss the incredible Veterans that call Alabama home. I'd like to highlight those I've met around the state, tell you about our conversations, and describe their acts of heroism. After all, it's those 400,000 Veterans who make this community so special.

February 16 sticks out as a special day I met some exceptional people. As I stood behind a podium on the stage of the Dothan Opera House, I scanned to my left and saw 11 of my colleagues who chose to participate in the first Alabama's Challenge Town Hall. As I looked into the crowd, there were more than 125 members of the Wiregrass community staring back. Some were Veterans, some were

healthcare professionals, others were community members who simply recognized the issue of Veteran suicide and took the opportunity to learn more about prevention. You can read about the town hall on page 4, but what stuck out more than anything is that in that moment we were all there together in an effort to make Alabama even better.

That Wednesday morning in Dothan is not only a reminder of the great strides being taken for Veterans in our state, but it also provided clarity that Alabama may finally be out of the COVID-19 pandemic. We might finally be attacking our state's toughest issues together again in person — permanently. As organizing and planning took place for the Alabama's Challenge Town Hall, there were concerns about the Omicron spike statewide. There was a fear of the ramifications of a large crowd gathering in the Dothan Opera House. Instead, the positivity rate dropped and we were able to welcome more than 100 members of the community to discuss ways to improve the Veteran community.

There's something special about the Veteran community. This is a community that is unlike any other. We're a talkative group. We like sharing stories. We like making jokes at the other branches. We're a fun group. All the things that makes the Veteran community special are also things that make life more enjoyable. The photo on the cover of this newsletter was chosen not only to highlight ADVA's participation in the first Alabama's Challenge Town Hall, it is also a literal visual to signify that we are here for you statewide and ready to continue those conversations that will lead to positive change. ADVA is here to serve you and it's our honor and privilege to do so.

ON THE COVER

Members of the ADVA pose for a photo in the Dothan Opera House after the Alabama's Challenge Town Hall on February 16.

(From left to right: Houston County Veterans Service Officer Davy Daughtry, Public Information Officer Brandon Miller, Assistant Commissioner of Outreach and Engagement Bob Horton, Commissioner Kent Davis, Assistant Commissioner of Operations Jeff Newton, Veterans Well-Being Program Manager Sissy Louise Moore, Coffee County Veterans Service Officer Meria Nelson, and District III Manager Lynda Jenkins.)

ADVA

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ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT

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VETERANS HOMES PROGRAM

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ALABAMA G.I. DEPENDENT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

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ADVA ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER NAMED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ALAVETNET

Congratulations to ADVA Assistant Commissioner of Outreach and Engagement Bob Horton for being appointed by Governor Kay Ivey to serve as the Executive Director for the Alabama Executive Veterans Network (AlaVetNet).

Assistant Commissioner Horton is serving his second tour with the ADVA. After retiring from active duty with the Alabama Army National Guard in 2008, he served as public information specialist for the ADVA from 2008-2015. He has also served as public information manager for the Alabama Department of Corrections, but returned to the ADVA in 2019 in his current role.

"Bob is a great asset to AlaVetNet and we are excited for him to have this opportunity," said ADVA Commissioner Kent Davis. "I cannot say enough about the work Bob has provided as the Assistant Commissioner of Outreach and Engagement and I'm excited to see him use his experience and expertise in this new role."



AlaVetNet was established in December 2013 and re-chartered in November 2017 by Governor Ivey. AlaVetNet's charter is to facilitate unified, seamless, and systematic access to services for those who have served our country and our state. Led by the commissioners of the Alabama Departments of Veterans Affairs and Mental Health, as well as the Alabama National Guard Adjutant General, 19 state agencies are included. Joining in the effort are key registered nonprofits as public-private partnerships are vital in this effort to serve Alabama's Veterans, service members (including active duty, Guard, and Reserve), and their families.

Under the leadership of its three co-chairs, AlaVetNet's work is facilitated by an executive director supported by a small team of senior advisors. Seven functional teams address the full-spectrum of the needs of Alabama's Veterans in the areas of community support services, education and research, employment and workforce development, family and youth, health and wellbeing, legal and justice, and strategic communications. Additionally, AlaVetNet recognizes that many of the challenges facing Alabama's Veterans, service members, and their families call for cross-cutting and multi-disciplinary efforts.

You can learn more about AlaVetNet by visiting va.alabama.gov/oldalavetnet.



ALABAMA'S CHALLENGE

CITY OF DOTHAN HOSTS FIRST ALABAMA'S CHALLENGE TOWN HALL



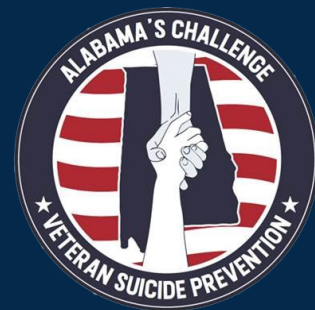
After the COVID-19 pandemic delayed it nearly two years, Alabama's Challenge for Preventing Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) held its first town hall. The City of Dothan hosted the event on February 16 at the Dothan Opera House with more than 125 Veterans, healthcare workers, and community members in attendance.

The town hall included a panel of representatives from 10 organizations in the Wiregrass. The panel included representatives from the ADVA, Alabama Department of Mental Health, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Veterans Recovery Resources, SpectraCare Health Services, 211 Connects Alabama, Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System, Alabama Suicide Prevention and Resources Coalition, Lyster Army Health Clinic, and Disabled American Veterans.

"As I told Mayor Mark Saliba, the City of Dothan was an incredible host for the ADVA and Alabama's Challenge for our first town hall," said ADVA Commissioner and Alabama's Challenge Co-Chair Kent Davis. "It was encouraging to see such a large turnout from Veterans in the Wiregrass and we look forward to holding more town halls statewide."

Town halls are being planned in Mobile, Montgomery, Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, and Huntsville.

Alabama's Challenge is an initiative aimed to create an impactful, long-term outcome across the state as we continue fighting the stigma of mental illness. Raising awareness of suicide prevention can help us understand the cause and circumstances that lead to mental health issues. The ADVA is a lead agency within Alabama's Challenge and assists with connecting with SMVF to provide information and knowledge about suicide, provide support, and provide resources and options to deal with PTSD and crisis situations.



CITY OF DOTHAN HOSTS VETERANS RESOURCES AND JOB FAIR

ADVA Commissioner Kent Davis and ADVA staff members, including Veterans Service Officers from District III, returned to the Wiregrass on March 3 for a Veterans Resources and Job Fair at the Dothan Civic Center.

The event, which was a collaborative effort among the City of Dothan, Alabama Department of Labor, the Montgomery VA Regional Office, Still Serving Veterans and other state, federal, and local agencies, was a free one-day, one-stop service that included nearly 100 providers of Veterans resources and employment opportunities.

In addition, ADVA and VA provided representatives to give Veterans and their families more information about state and federal benefits and services. Of the 225 members of the Wiregrass community to attend the Veterans Resources and Job Fair, more than 50% of Veterans were assisted by ADVA Veterans Service Officers.



Still Serving Veterans President/CEO Paulette Risher, VA Regional Office-Montgomery Executive Director Cory Hawthorne, ADVA Commissioner Kent Davis, Dothan Mayor Mark Saliba, and Alabama Department of Labor Secretary Fitzgerald Washington.

WORLD WAR II VETERAN IDENTIFIED THROUGH DNA BURIED IN ALABAMA

More than 75 years after Army Pfc. Bill Morrison was killed in battle, his remains returned to his home state of Alabama and were interred in the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort.

An interment service was held March 4. In attendance were family members and representatives from the ADVA, Blue Star Salute Foundation, Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, Patriot Riders, American Legion Riders, and Sons of the American Revolution.

Pfc. Morrison was reportedly killed in action in November 1944 while battling German forces in the Hurtgen Forest in Germany. His body was not recovered at the time.



Unidentified remains, possibly belonging to Pfc. Morrison, were located by a German civilian and recovered by the American Graves Registration Command in 1946. The remains were buried in Belgium's Ardennes American Cemetery in 1950 and disinterred in April 2019 when they were sent to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) lab for identification.

The DPAA announced confirmation that Pfc. Morrison was accounted for on July 9, 2021.

MORE NEWS FROM ADVA

RAISE AND REALIGNMENT PROJECT: The ADVA recently completed a headstone raise and realignment project at the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort. The project was part of an ongoing effort to ensure the cemetery's appearance is maintained with the utmost respect and dignity.

The Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort has very exacting standards for the vertical and horizontal alignment of headstones. The effort ensures the ADVA met the high standard.

APPEALS & REVIEW GENERATES \$17 MILLION IN RETROACTIVE BENEFIT PAYMENTS: The ADVA Appeals & Review (A&R) Division celebrated a successful 2021 calendar year, generating earnings of more than \$17 million in retroactive benefits payments for Veterans and their surviving family members.

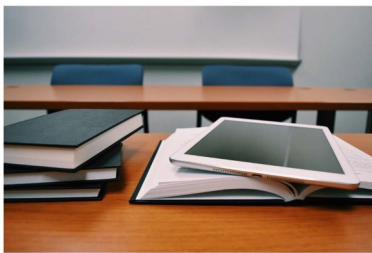
A&R Manager Mark Sullivan challenges his team to collectively generate an average of \$1 million per month. Last year, it averaged \$1.4 million per month, with more than \$2 million in retroactive benefits payments being earned in June, September, and October.

HMR OF ALABAMA AWARDED HOWARD HOME CONTRACT: During its January 7 meeting, the State Board of Veterans Affairs approved a proposal from HMR of Alabama to provide skilled-care services of the Col. Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home in Pell City. The contract is for the period beginning March 1, 2022 through Feb. 28, 2027.

NEWS TO USE

ALABAMA G.I. DEPENDENT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM EXPANSION INCLUDED IN BILL PACKAGE TO MAKE STATE MORE MILITARY & VETERAN FRIENDLY

Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship Program



Edition Date: Spring 2022

Governor Kay Ivey signed six bills on March 8 aimed at making Alabama even more military and Veteran friendly. Included was Senate Bill 119, introduced by Sen. Will Barfoot, which expands the Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship Program administered by the ADVA.

The bill expands the program to include qualifying private institutions of higher learning. The Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship Program previously applied to public higher-education institutions in Alabama and comprehensive transition and postsecondary program (CTPs) for students with intellectual disabilities. An updated informational booklet (left) detailing the program is available on the ADVA website: va.alabama.gov.

Of the other five bills signed by Governor Ivey, Senate Bill 116 allows children of active military members moving to Alabama to pre-roll in local public schools, without having to be physically present in the state. Senate Bills 99, 167, and 141 allow for greater flexibility in occupational licensing for military spouses. Senate Bill 28 would authorize the Alabama Space National Guard within the Alabama National Guard if the federal government creates the Space National Guard.

COLD WAR VETERAN LICENSE PLATES NOW AVAILABLE

The Alabama Department of Revenue (ADR) now offers a Cold War Veteran license plate for eligible Veterans. To qualify for the plate, Veterans must be a resident of Alabama and provide either a DD214 or a certification of eligibility from the ADVA after providing its office with other authoritative documentation evidencing eligibility. Surviving spouses of a Veteran may not obtain or retain the plate, according to the ADR. For more information, visit revenue.alabama.gov.



ALABAMA CELEBRATES MILITARY APPRECIATION DAY

Alabama celebrated America's finest on February 24 with Governor Kay Ivey proclaiming it Military Appreciation Day. The proclamation came after Lt. Gen. Donnie Walker, the deputy commanding general and senior commander of Redstone Arsenal, was honored by the Alabama Legislature.

"Alabama is home to thousands of active duty members, reservists and some 400,000 Veterans that play a vital role in preserving our country's freedom and safety," Governor Ivey said. "As governor, it is a major priority of mine to do everything in my power to ensure Alabama remains one of the most military friendly states in America."



BILL TO ESTABLISH HEALTH REGISTRY FOR FORT McCLELLAN VETERANS PASSES HOUSE

Good news could be on the horizon for Veterans who served on Fort McClellan. On March 3, the U.S. House passed the Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2021, which addresses health care, presumption of service-connection, research, resources, and other matters related to Veterans who were exposed to toxic substances during military service.

The bill provides several eligibility updates for Veterans who participated in a toxic exposure risk activity or served in specified locations on specified dates. Establishing and maintaining a health registry for Fort McClellan Veterans is included in Section 702.

This Congressional movement comes several months after the State Board of Veterans Affairs (SBVA) passed a resolution during its October 1 meeting urging the Alabama Congressional Delegation to support establishing a health registry for Fort McClellan Veterans.

The bill, now that it has passed the House, moves to the Senate. If it passes the Senate, it will then move to the President to sign into law.



VA ANNOUNCES RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSET AND INFRASTRUCTURE REVIEW

On March 14, the VA released its Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) report, which includes recommendations by VA Secretary Denis McDonough to cement the department as the primary, world-class provider and coordinator of Veterans health care for generations to come.

The VA MISSION Act requires Secretary McDonough to publish the AIR report in the Federal Register and submit it to Congress and a presidentially appointed AIR Commission.

The AIR Commission will conduct public hearings as part of its review of VA's recommendations before submitting its own recommendations to the president for further review in 2023.

The report's release marks the beginning of an in-depth deliberative process. The AIR report is the result of years of research and analysis intended to help VA build a health care network with the right facilities, in the right places, to provide the right care for all Veterans, including underserved and at-risk Veteran populations in every part of the country — making sure the facilities and services are accessible to Veterans in their communities.

The recommendations center around improving access to and quality of care for Veterans by ensuring the department's infrastructure in the decades ahead reflects Veterans' needs and 21st century design standards. VA is investing heavily in its number one asset — its employees, strengthening its public/private strategic partnerships and elevating its role as the leading health care research entity and the leading health care workforce training institution in the country.

You can view the full review at www.va.gov/aircommissionreport.



2021 ADVA EMPLOYEE AWARDS

COMMISSIONER'S EXCELLENCE AWARD

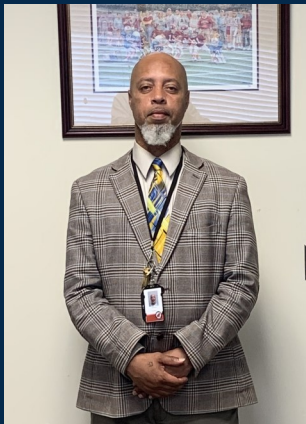


Rhonda Kay Jackson, Clarke Co. Veterans Service Officer

Rhonda Kay Jackson serves Veterans in not only Clarke County but also provided itinerant services for Monroe and Washington counties in 2021. Throughout the year, she serviced 2,400 Veterans, submitting 100 compensation claims, 30 pension claims, and 20 education claims, maintaining a 0% reported error rate. She was instrumental in the reopening of the Washington County office, working with county officials to find office space and setting up operational support while continuing her other duties. Ms. Jackson also has a strong presence in the communities she serves and regularly participates in local events.

"Ms. Jackson epitomizes the title of 'advocate' and is an extremely positive reflection of the ADVA," said District III Manager Lynda Jenkins. "She is a person of deep moral character and conviction and her respect for others causes them to trust her and enjoy her company."

VETERANS ADVOCATE AWARD



**John Jones, Shelby County
Veterans Service Officer**

John Jones served with distinction in the U.S. Marine Corps for 20 years and has continued to serve his country and state with distinction through exceptional service as the Shelby County Veterans Service Officer. Mr. Jones serves nearly 14,000 Veterans and during Fiscal Year 2021 had approximately 2,217 personal contacts and filed 418 original compensation and 133 original pension applications. He was instrumental in the relocation of the Shelby County office in July 2021, moving to a modern space that provides better accessibility for disabled Veterans and better parking.

"He is an impeccable role model for what a Veterans Service Officer should exhibit in professional conduct, core values, and common courtesy when it comes to interacting with his staff, personnel within the district and department, county officials, and his community," said District II Manager Rogers Wilson.

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD



**Christopher Williams, Lee County
Assistant Veterans Service Officer**

Christopher Williams has provided service to Lee County Veterans conveying that he is trustworthy, reliable, and dedicated to the ADVA's mission. During 2021, he continued to pioneer "Project Digital" and "Project Digital 2.0," which digitally achieved all hard-copy documents. Mr. Williams also assisted the nearly 12,000 Veterans in Lee County while also traveling weekly to the Tallapoosa/Coosa County area and Chambers County to assist Veterans.

"Having an assistant as Mr. Williams, who is energetic, reliable, and knowledgeable, has made the many changes necessary to adapt and accomplish the ADVA's mission seamless," said Lee County Veterans Service Officer Sean Gathers. "Christopher Williams exhibits leadership qualities easily capable of executing the duties and responsibilities of a Veterans Service Officer."